

# THE ZINE AGE

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## Cover of *Yeah*, no. 3, June 1962.

*Yeah*, edited by Tuli Kupferberg. New York: Primary Information, 2017. 342 pages.

**NOW LET US PRAISE** the less famous Beats. Naphtali “Tuli” Kupferberg was born in 1923 into a Yiddish-speaking, secular Jewish family on Cannon Street in New York, five blocks from the East River on the madly congested eastern edge of the lower Lower East Side. He died eighty-six years later, only a mile and a half west, having spent most of his life in the city.

A Beatnik bard and a hippie sage, a Young Communist turned anarcho-pacifist, noted in Allen Ginsberg’s 1955 poem “Howl” for having jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge (although it was really the less-glamorous Manhattan one), Kupferberg was, with Ed Sanders, the cofounder of the Fugs and the man who coined the phrase “Kill for peace.” The raucous song that followed made him something of a celebrity, stalking

Manhattan in full combat mode cradling a toy M-16 and flashing a demented orangutan grin in Dušan Makavejev’s 1971 post-Godard masterpiece *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*. (He subsequently played the title character in the 1972 underground movie *Voulez-vous coucher avec God?* as an unkempt, hairy schmoozer—like Middle America’s worst nightmare.)

Kupferberg was also a soldier in the mimeograph revolution. Before the Fugs were founded, in 1964, before the Beatles recorded “She Loves You” in 1963, there was his affirmatively titled zine, *Yeah*. An ephemeral and barbaric East Village yawp that was originally given away or sold for a quarter (and is now preserved and reprinted, inserts included, in a facsimile edition Primary Information published last year), *Yeah* ran for ten issues, published between late 1961 and mid-1965—approximately the period between the Berlin and Cuban Missile crises, and of the apotheosis of the civil-rights movement, the assassination of JFK, and the first escalation of the Vietnam War.









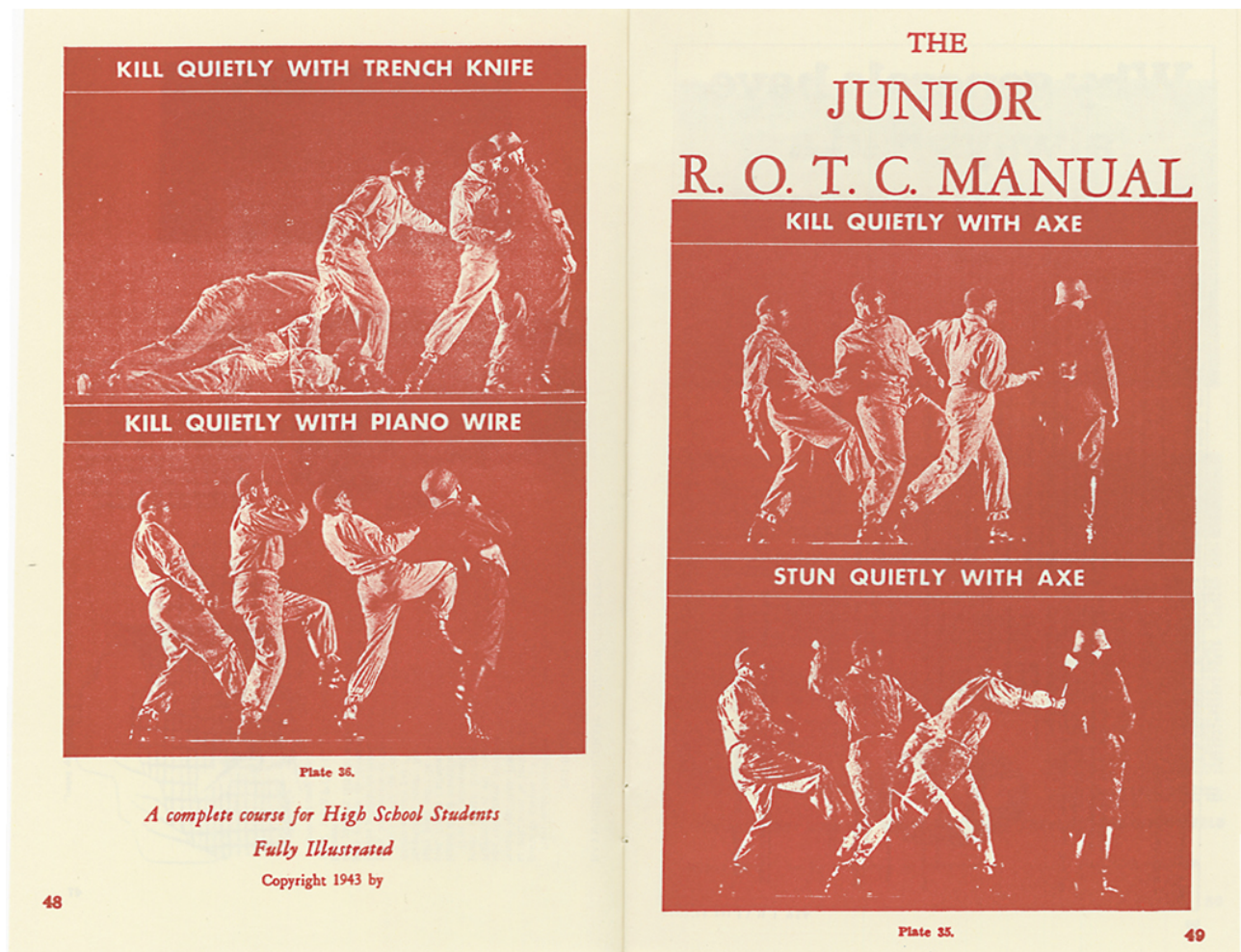
**Back-cover detail of *Yeah*, no. 7, December 1963.**

*Birth* placed particular emphasis on writing by children and the use of drugs. *Yeah* seems to have synthesized these concerns, being at once infantile and trippy. The first issue, comprising twenty pages dated December 1961, emblazoned by a weirdly tasteless cover drawing, annotated by some incoherent dialect, and self-described as a “satyric excursion,” opens with Kupferberg’s declaration that he wants “to put the revolution at the service of poetry” rather than vice versa. The undistinguished poems within include one mildly offensive e. e. cummings knockoff by R. E. L. Masters, who was soon to cowrite (with Jean Houston) the 1966 campus best seller *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*. A center spread of fastidiously arranged newspaper clippings and a back cover devoted to a vintage ad for o.k.-lax “bowel cleanser” augured better issues to follow, although not immediately.

The second number (February 1962) features a Yevgeny Yevtushenko poem (apparently filched from the *New York Times*) as well as another by “angry young man” Alan Sillitoe (reprinted from the English publication *Freedom*). Less decorous, the center clippings spread is dominated by the found headline “are our leaders suicidal lunatics?” and includes a detoured *Little Orphan Annie* comic strip. The back cover is a mock legal waiver to be signed by a woman before having sexual intercourse. An all-but-unreadable tribute to the Marine Corps (“The old gunny says . . .”), transcribed from the Corps’s semiofficial publication *Leatherneck*, further expands *Yeah*’s notion of objectionable material.

By the third issue (June 1962), identified as a “chronicle of the last days,” *Yeah* is positively twitching with nuclear jitters. Kupferberg’s screed-poem “A Funny Thing Happened to Me Today on the Way to the Crematorium” is overshadowed by an anonymous, semiliterate piece of hate mail written to an unknown female participant in a midtown Manhattan antiwar demonstration. A bulletin from Alex Comfort (who was later to strike gold with *The Joy of Sex* [1972]) on the pirate radio station the Voice of Nuclear Disarmament, taken from the British magazine *Peace News*, further heightens the sense of crisis.

The sense of impending apocalypse continues in *Yeah* number 4 (September 1962), which offers subscriptions for four issues “or until the end of the world.” The cover image, a scatological H-bomb joke, is swiped from Paul Krassner’s exercise in applied scurrility *The Realist*. There are two crude yet delicate anti-American political cartoons by the black nationalist Robert F. Williams, then self-exiled to Cuba, and, as a fold-in extra, a complete reproduction of the July 1962 issue of the American National Party publication *Kill!* From here, *Yeah* is basically a mimeograph magazine that draws on other publications such as these, just as the early *Mad* magazine was a comic book making fun of other comic books.



Spread from *Yeah*, no. 10, July 1965.

The “Gala Xmas Number” (December 1962), dedicated to the “mass murderers” Kennedy and Khrushchev, announces the “First Annual Worlds [sic] Worst Poetry Contest”—pretty funny, in that *Yeah* published quite a few contenders, not least Kupferberg’s travesty of Keats’s 1820 “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “Ode on the Chinese Bomb”: “Thou still unravished bomb of quietness!” In truth, Kupferberg would prove a better songwriter than poet (“Morning, Morning,” from 1966, may be the only Fugs composition to merit the adjective *lovely*, and “Nothing,” from the previous year, adapted from a monstrously ironic, dirgelike Yiddish paean to potatoes, is a masterpiece of Zen Judaism), but he was a marvelously dexterous mimeographer.

*Yeah* number 7 (December 1963) takes “A Look at the White Problem,” with material ranging from pre–Civil War racial caricature to excerpts from *The Niggle Papers*, a satirical antisegregation newsletter put out by “moderate” white students at the University of Mississippi in 1956, to the Nation of Islam journal *Muhammad Speaks* and publications from the Information Service of South Africa. The insert is a Canadian pamphlet devoted to police service dogs and annotated by clips: “The Nazis introduced the system all over Europe.” There is also evidence of the road not taken in one of Beat-feminist extraordinaire Anita Steckel’s paint-distressed photomontages, which places a scowling black man at the center of da Vinci’s *Last Supper*.

*Yeah*’s penultimate issues, published in mid-1964 and mysteriously known as “True Professions” and “True Professions, Part 2,” are almost entirely devoted to fastidious arrangements of found material—a mélange of crass commercials for medical procedures, white-supremacist tracts, military propaganda, grotesque classified ads and “Believe It or Not!” newsprint absurdities (“Florida Police Halt Car with Chimp at Wheel”). These amalgams feel analogous to Bruce Conner’s early junk assemblages or Ken Jacobs’s contemporaneous use of found film footage. (Jacobs contributed several appropriated clippings to *Yeah*.)

Around this time, Kupferberg and Sanders joined forces to form the Fugs. Sanders’s better-known, more-literary publication *Fuck You* had approximately the same lifespan as *Yeah*, from February 1962 to June 1965. In July 1965, *Yeah* ended with a majestic torrent of cuttings as Kupferberg cleaned out his files. The 108-page tenth issue, which sold for ninety-nine cents with the words kill for peace emblazoned as a screaming tabloid headline on the cover (sheet music for the song was included within), is a scrapbook history of Kupferberg’s twentieth century, refracted through the prism of American militarism—most impressively in the comic-strip assemblage “Choose Your War!”

As a publication, *Yeah* might be considered the skid-row version of Harvey Kurtzman’s *fumetto*-driven satirical magazine *Help!* (which began publishing in the summer of 1960), and is at times even more savage and puerile than *The Realist* (founded in 1958). As a cultural artifact, *Yeah* is somewhere on the spectrum between the vitriolic shock collages of the Holocaust-surviving anti-Pop artist Boris Lurie and *Lost Lost Lost* (1976), the melancholy first installment of the epic diary film by another H-bomb-obsessed DP, Jonas Mekas. As a reissued boxed set, it’s a time capsule as well as a work of art, dirt cheap at the price.

J. Hoberman is a frequent contributor to Artforum.